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ABSTRACT

There are three general approaches to organizing a basic mythology course: geographical, conceptual/thematic, or a combination of the two. The geographical approach offers a wealth of material organized by focusing on one or several of the world's mythologies and offers the opportunity to find out more about the influences on the development of Western thought. The conceptual or thematic approach stresses theory, introducing myth as a serious area of study. A paucity of texts and the need for more background knowledge, however, have made this approach much less popular than the geographical one. In a combination of the two approaches, conceptual and thematic concerns govern the day-to-day progress of teaching mythology, with students choosing a geographical area of specialization. Whatever approach is used, the objectives of the course must be carefully chosen. Before mastery of given particular mythologies, the students should understand (1) what is and what is not myth, (2) the many purposes and functions of myth, (3) the theories of how myths originate and are shaped, (4) why and in what ways people believe the myths of their culture or group, (5) how myths have been analyzed or interpreted over the centuries, and (6) the connections between oral or written narratives and the visual expression of a culture or group. (JL)

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Teaching Mythology at College Level

I will admit it. I'm hooked on mythology--absolutely and irretrievably hooked on it. It's gotten in my blood, and like an insidious disease has taken possession of my system. Fortunately for me, though, there's actually nothing insidious about mythology and nothing about my case of mythophilia or--as may be more appropriate--mythomania that can be construed as being terminal. I'm not in danger of dying from it. Quite the contrary, in fact, I'm in danger of living too joyously and vigorously from it, eager as I am to get up and at the new day's worth of work in mythology just about every day: to learn more about this interdisciplinary subject so remarkable for its being unbounded by time or place, to teach the classes in it that I've designed over the years, to convince others like you of the importance of mythology in any humanistic education. It has led me to libraries from coast to coast, to touring more museums in just a summer's time than most people tour in a lifetime, to visiting scores of archaeological sites in middle and north America (with scores more in other countries to follow as finances and time permit), to speaking at conventions and meetings around the country, to writing articles and books. It has led some students to call me "Mythster Smith," made most friends and relatives sure that I'm going to turn any conversation imaginable into one about myth given the time to do so, caused my wife and daughter to be suspicious of my real motives when I suggest a vacation trip. As I

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said, I'm hooked on mythology, but frankly I can't see a better way to spend a lifetime than by being hooked on something worthwhile, than by living it in unrestrained and driving enthusiasm for something of value to others. My only regret is that I didn't discover mythology until I was well into my thirties.

To continue in this honest-above-all-else vein, I will admit something else. When I was first asked to teach a mythology course fourteen years ago, I had never even taken a course in the subject myself and knew about as much about it as I did (and still do) about nuclear physics. For the first two or three years I taught it, I was terrorized by the subject matter and its presentation, not to mention tyrannized by its bottomless depths. But I stuck with it and with the books, trying everything possible to make my classes in mythology as interesting and informative as circumstances would allow. Then came some success and a modicum of understanding, in whatever order, and now I'm here presuming to tell you how it can be done.

Well, let me make one last admission before getting on to what is more important: I have no doubt at all I can tell you how it can be done. If I have no illusions that I know all there is to know about mythology--far from it in fact--I have an abundance of study in the subject and a fair amount of experience in the classroom to draw upon. And you have remembered that I'm absolutely and irretrievably hooked on mythology, haven't you?

First things first. The next time you prepare to teach a basic mythology class, you'll want to choose carefully from among the three general approaches to course organization open to you: (1) the

geographical, (2) the conceptual and/or thematic, and (3) some combination of the geographical and conceptual/thematic. Don't opt for one of them before you have recognized what will be gained and what will be lost in the approach you have chosen.

Courses organized around the geographical approach focus on one or several of the world's mythologies. Classical (or Greek and Roman), ancient Egyptian, Norse, Mesopotamian, Hindu, and North American Indian are more likely to be found in this approach, although others might occasionally be included since paperbound collections of myths of other cultures and societies are showing up on the market more than in the past. In a ten or twelve week course, a few weeks can be spent on one of the mythologies, two more on another, and so on, depending on the amount of class time needed to cover each satisfactorily.

There are definite advantages here, not the least of which is the kinds of books available for use, most of the ones now on the market being centered on one mythology, a few more being surveys of at least several mythologies. Also, no one can doubt that there is a plus, for members of the Western World, in knowing something about the mythologies tha have, in whatever ways and to whatever extent, had some influence on the development of Western Civilization and its thought. (This obviously accounts for the popularity of Classical mythology--that is, where the polished, literary quality of the myths alone doesn't.) Teaching a few or several individual mythologies has the additional advantage of built-in organization and focus, both where the teacher's preparation is concerned and the student's. In studying ancient Egyptian mythology, for instance, all that is ancient Egyptian--culture,

religious beliefs and rituals, monuments and architectural design, art, signs and symbols, and so on--bears on that study directly, feeding and nourishing it at all points. The availability of teaching aids (films, slides, maps, posters, charts, etc.) in any one of the popular mythologies is a further plus of the geographical approach, as should be obvious.

Courses organized around the conceptual and/or thematic approach put myth theory ahead of all else and are comparative in nature. They are clearly modeled on introductory courses in the sciences and some of the social sciences, just as are most folklore and comparative religions courses of the beginning sort. Instead of a general movement from mythology to mythology, which as we've seen dominates the geographical approach, the movement is from concept or theme to further concept or theme. Such a pattern as the following one might thus be found: first, a few class meetings focused on what is and what isn't myth, what the classes of myth are, what the types of myth are; then, some meetings centered on prevalent motifs and parallels; then, meetings on how myths are shaped and how they originate; then some meetings on the purposes myths may have and the functions they serve in societies which have them; then, blocks of meetings devoted to major myth types; and, finally, some time spent with the history of myth study, which is, in essence, coverage of how myths have been approached through the centuries.

While there are solid advantages to the conceptual and/or thematic approach, they are weighed against heavily enough by disadvantages that make the approach unpopular at this time. The principal advantage is that when the approach is soundly engineered, students leave the course knowing mythology as a serious area of study, just as students who leave

an introductory sociology or psychology course know those disciplines as serious areas of study. They do not know all they can about any one concept or theme in mythology any more than students who have taken an introductory psychology course know all they can about, say, schizophrenia. They have, however, surveyed the field and have come in contact with the principal theory and terminology involved. The subject has been introduced as a subject through its parts and features. Additionally, students who leave an introductory mythology course organized around the conceptual and/or thematic approach have read and thought about myths from all parts of the world and have dealt with them comparatively toward seeing differences and similarities.

The disadvantages begin with the paucity of texts organized appropriately for use in a course that uses the conceptual and/or thematic approach. There are a few collections of creation myths on the market in paperbound editions, a couple of works on heroic myths in paperbound editions, but from that point on the pickings are slim at very best, topped by the fact that there is no one book that presents concepts and themes across the spectrum of possibilities needed for a course so ordered. Add to this the disadvantage that the amount of background in myth study needed by anyone who uses the approach is far greater than that for the person who uses the geographical approach, and it's not hard to see why the conceptual and/or thematic approach is little favored.

I have for several years used the third of the three approaches to course organization, a combination of the geographical and conceptual/thematic. Day-to-day progress through my introductory mythology course is governed by the organization I outlined in talking about the conceptual

and/or thematic approach. What we do in class and the reading that is assigned in conjunction with class meetings (there are lots of handouts) comprises the bulk of what is important in the course and the substance of three required exams during the quarter. In addition, though, students must accumulate points from optional exams and projects to gain the grades they seek in the course. There are eight geographical optional exams they can choose from, and their course projects must augment what they've learned for the optional exams they choose. A student who tests in Norse/Teutonic mythology, for instance, must do additional research in that mythology. Others who teach mythology may wish in some way to split the quarter or semester in such a way that part of it is devoted to concept and theme, with the other part devoted to mythologies geographically attended to. Were there twelve weeks in my course rather than the nine to ten the quarter system provides me with, I'd probably design such a split for my own course.

Whichever of the three general approaches to course design you choose, I would strongly recommend that you with great care consider next the objectives you set up for the course. The great joy of any mythology course, for student and teacher alike, is that it has the potential to open so many doors to knowledge, to understanding, to the nature of man, to the ways of the world. I'm not at all sure much can be done to realize this potential by organizing the basic mythology course around, say, classical mythology or around any four or five of the world's mythologies. For many years I tried it that way and failed--which is not at all to say my failure must mean the failure of everyone else who tries it that way. It's just that I never could break the tendency to compartmentalize that seems to

characterize students and people in general. If they study Norse mythology, what they learn of themselves, of mankind, of how and why people believe, of how their own beliefs are related to the beliefs of others in other places and times is reduced significantly. Even if they study Norse and ancient Egyptian and North American Indian and Hindu, they compartmentalize each mythology so easily, so subtly that what they know when they leave the course is those mythologies and too little of what is really important.

As you establish the objectives for your basic mythology course, why not set before mastery of given mythologies the following objectives accomplished and, presumably, mastered?

First of all, students should understand what is and what isn't myth. Definitions of myth abound, but too few of them work with all myths in all situations. If we say, with John Fiske (Myths and Mythmakers, 1899) that myth is "an explanation, by the uncivilized mind, of some natural phenomenon," what are we to do with the myths of civilized people now or in the past? What are we to do with the many myths from around the world which don't have explanatory purpose or, more importantly, that have other purposes in addition? If we say, with Lewis Spence (Outlines of Mythology, 1944) that "Myth is, in its earliest form, . . . 'the book of words' which accompanies the dramatic representation of ritual," we're presuming an awful lot of the thousands of myths for which we have no accompanying ritual, not to mention presuming an origin and purpose of myth that may or may not be accurate in individual instances. It is far better to keep purpose, meaning, and origin out of definitions of myth and try to embrace all myths in any definition we devise. If we start with something simple, like "myth is a traditional narrative or story thought highly enough of by a culture that

it is handed down generation to generation," we can then posit three classes of myth to clarify: (1) sacral myths--those myths in which the main characters are gods and goddesses and in which the focus is their activities, myths having to do with what is religious and sacred in a culture, myths believed in implicitly by cultures which have them, myths having to do with the supernatural and spiritual realms; (2) legends--those myths having to do with important mortals (heroes, kings, famous people), myths that are believed to be historical or factual or biographical by the cultures which have them, myths which are secular as opposed to religious; (3) folktales--myths that may or may not have grains of actual history or fact in them but which are intended as entertainment first and instruction after that, myths which some cultures distinguish as "false" as opposed to "true" stories, myths sometimes of the real world and sometimes of the world of fantasy.

Whether or not the introductory mythology course has as its approach the conceptual and/or thematic, the definition of myth provided should work across the broad range of the world's myths and should be amply illustrated by examples outside those incorporated in any geographical organization the course may have.

Second, in our list of objectives students should know and understand the many purposes and functions of myth. While a simple myth may have only one or two purposes at times, the number of purposes to be derived from complex myths (including serial myths) will almost always be larger. Also, while any one myth will have an overall purpose, most people looking at the myth will spot it and overlook the subtler purposes. For example, the great majority of the world's myths not only broadly reinforce social

systems, cultural mores, and the like, they regularly reinforce the rules and regulations for each of the sexes. Just about every myth which has a male or female character will, in other words, tip some portion of the society's ideas about the conduct and role of male or female. There's not much sense in overlooking that purpose in any myth.

Among the many other purposes myths may have are these: to record history, factual events, people; to explain phenomena, the otherwise unexplainable; to account for what cannot be seen; to convey and maintain tradition; to inspire, rouse, excite, create awe/fear/etc.; to insure the continuity of existence and, as Raphael Petazzoni has noted, the permanence of the world. In short, all myths teach, even folktales. And they all entertain, mainly folktales and those myths, like the myths of the Greeks and Romans, that have been highly polished by the creative writer. Where the myths of a single or several mythologies focused on in the basic course do not yield all of these purposes or all of these purposes in a great enough variety of ways, the myths of other cultures and groups can be brought in for comparative use during class time.

Third among the objectives, students should have good understanding of the theories of how myths originate and are shaped. All cultures, to varying degrees of course, pass their sacral myths and legends on as some form of history, some kind of fact. It is never wise in any mythology course to get bogged down over the matter of historicity, factuality, and the like, but attention must anyway be paid to how myths are thought to come about and how they come to have in them what they do. Without that attention, any understanding of mythology your students gain will be limited and the value of the course will, in my estimation, be severely

undermined. (It is for this reason that I spend time at the start of my basic mythology course with what effect use of the word "myth" to mean mistaken notion or falsehood has on myth study if we let it, and on how myths are neither provable nor disprovable.) We can seldom--almost never--affix with assurance any one theory of the origin of myth to any one myth, but being aware of what the theories are is impórtant for understanding the mythmaking process. The theories include these: myths tell events and about people/gods just as they were in fact; myths tell events and about people/gods but with distortions, intentional or unintentional; myths are outright fabrications, inventions, lies; myths are received by cultures from higher powers; myths are made by priests, shamans witch doctors, other leaders (through dreams, ecstatic trances, visions, revelations); myths are public daydreams, just as the dreams of the individual are private; myths are spread by cultures one to another, original myths being changed in the process; myths are the independent inventions of cultures, all cultures going through similar stages at similar times in their development.

Inherent in most of those theories of the origin of myth is the underlying notion that myths are "shaped." As a result, it is always useful to have students observe, early in the basic mythology course, what I call the "shaping factors." All myths in some way or other reflect the environment from which they emerge. Details of the climate and geography of the mythmakers are usually evident in them. So, too, are what the mythmakers know and don't know (a factor called, for lack of a better word, "education"). The mythmakers' culture will also be apparent in their myths. And, sometimes at least, features of the myths of cultures

with whom the mythmakers came in contact will show in the myths as diffused or contact features. Close inspection of selected myths for the shaping factors and due attention paid to the theories of how myths originate are most important in the basic mythology course as ways, among many, of understanding the nature of myth.

The fourth broad objective of the course as I've outlined it is to help students gain an understanding of why and in what ways people believe the myths of their culture or group. As with all the objectives, this can be accomplished slowly as an evolving concern or it can be the focus of a few class meetings and related readings. I handle it in both ways, leaving the focus as such for almost half-way through the quarter--after we've already spent time on the preceding three objectives. Students inevitably have the question "how could people ever believe that myth?" tucked away in their minds along with the many others they either develop as a mythology course progresses or come equipped with as they show up the first day. It's important enough to the study of mythology to deal with the nature of belief and how belief is enacted, for myth is the handmaiden of both.

If you can find a way to parallel current-day "myths" with those of the cultures whose myths you use in class, you'll be on the road to handling why and in what ways people believe their myths. Try the reports of sea and land monsters (Loch Ness, Yeti, Sesquatch, and their many relatives) and reports of UFO's as the means to a purposeful end. The similarities between the beasts of myth and those of today's "sightings," the elusiveness of both where actual provability is concerned, and the overall persistence of their presence throughout history add up to pretty impressive potential

for helping students understand belief--just as does similar handling of UFO matters. Also, you might try working with such ideas as how we are what we know (or don't know), how we're creatures of a time and place, how our deductive logic often has hidden or far-from-proven premises playing pivotal roles in what (and how) we conclude. Perception is the key to all where belief in myths is at stake. Never doubt that for a minute.

Fifth among the objectives is assisting students to understand how myths have been analyzed or interpreted over the centuries. In my own basic mythology course, this is the culmination--along with, that is, some work at putting together all that we've done during the quarter. It is important that students know how and in what contexts the various theories of interpretation flourished--the rational theory (including Euhemerism), the allegorical theory, the natural theory, the diffusion theory, the polygenesist theory, the sociological (or anthropological, "functional") theory, the ritual theory, the psychoanalytic theory (both Freudian and Jungian versions), the structural theory. A chronological survey of these, with the names of main proponents, comprises a kind of history of mythology from the 6th Century B.C. down to our own times. More importantly, the theories all have something to offer, regardless the flaws they may have, and putting them to work toward understanding the nature of myth is, to me, a must, particularly since by the time we come to them in my basic course, we have already devised an eclectic way to approach myths. The outcome of the course, on one level at least, is knowing what can and what can't be said about a myth given what it is we do or don't bring to it.

Connected to this fifth objective, but woven throughout the course rather than focused on at any one point during it, is the sixth, leading students to an understanding of the connections between the oral or written narratives of a culture or group and the visual (signs, symbols, rituals, art). It goes without saying that students should know well the nature of myth as an essentially oral narrative form. They should be aware of the way oral transmission alters a myth, the way the pen or stylus of the writer makes more nearly permanent what was a subtly evolving narrative. For this reason they should read at least some myths in as close to original versions as possible, as well as the many they will read in summary forms. They should know the circumstances of myths being told in their native contexts and be privy to the connections to ritual "performance." The visual signs and symbols of cultures, they should be aware, are often embedded inconspicuously in narratives. I know of no way to accomplish any of these, or to handle any of this single objective, without doing it along the way in a basic course. The danger here is the too technical, the too abstract. An easy-does-it approach therefore seems to me the better way to work through the difficulties in a basic mythology course.

So, we have heard my ideas on how mythology may be taught at college level. The keys are but two--choice of an overall approach in the course first, meaningful objectives second. You will by now have noticed that I made no mention of combining folklore and mythology in the same introductory course. Why ever would anyone want to do that? Mythology has a history, as I've said, dating back two-and-a-half millenia--albeit spotily so. Its study crosses the boundaries of a dozen disciplines. The narratives which form its main substance have no geographical or

temporal bounds, coming from all around the earth and from all times as they do. There's more than enough to occupy a lifetime in myth study, let alone a quarter or a semester. Why, then, even think of combining it with folklore?

But, then, you'll remember I said I'm hooked on mythology, not folklore. Irretrievably hooked, to be more exact.